DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 192 367 CS 205 885

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TITLE Encouraging Student Response to Literature.
PUB DATE Sep 80
NOTE 10p.: Paper presented at the Southeast National Council of Teachers of English Affiliate Conference (Atlanta, GA, September 25-27, 1980).

EDRS PRICE MF01/PC01 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS *Attitude Change: *Change Strategies: Creative Dramatics: Elementary Secondary Education: *Literature Appreciation: Mass Media: *Motivation Techniques: Oral Reading: *Student Attitudes: *Student Interests: Teaching Methods: Writing (Composition)

ABSTRACT

Too often teachers ask students to forget their personal experiences in relation to a literary work when they come into the classroom. Many classroom practices (selection of materials, book report/test syndrome, and ineffective assignments) can be detrimental to the pleasure in reading and the building of a desire for continued interest in books. An environment can be created in which students feel comfortable about discussing their responses to their reading, including such approaches as (1) reading groups--developing small reading interest groups that suggest to students that one reason for reading is the opportunity to share reading experiences with others: (2) oral and dramatic activity--providing an aesthetic dimension and aiding comprehension and appreciation: (3) writing activity--encouraging the student's response to what has been read without dwelling unduly upon critical reaction: and (4) media activity--making the study of literature more interesting by adding a dimension that is part of students' lives. Rather than teaching literature as a depersonalized object that has little relevance to the students' lives outside the classroom, teachers must acknowledge the great importance of the reader's personal response and the text. (HOD)

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ED192367

Encouraging Student Response to Literature

Most of us would agree that almost any amount of knowledge may be relevant to a literary work: knowledge of sources, tradition, development of the work, revisions, life and experiences of the author. But the relevance of feelings, experiences, attitudes, values and beliefs--the kinds of knowledge which readers bring to a selection--and the extent to which these should be considered in a literature class, on these aspects a curious silence has existed in our profession.

Traditionally in our teaching of literature, we have denied students the very heart of the reading process, for we ask students to forget their personal experiences in relation to a work when they come into a classroom. This forces them to step onto "firm ground" where students and teacher can discuss and examine the work from a safe distance. Such action is based on the assumption that in this way we all can share the same experience in the work and thus have a better understanding of it. But reading is not, and should not be, an act of divorce. It is an act of marriage, the reader and the text joining in a mutual experience which gives added dimensions to each. Without readers and their experiences, the text means little. With them, it becomes something alive and responsive, but only because in the process, readers bring to the work all of the personal aspects which we have gone to such lengths to eliminate from our teaching and writing about literature.

Given the environment in which we work--the crowded classroom, the credit-bearing course, the grading process--it is not surprising that we have chosen

CS205885

to talk about literature in much the same way as one might talk about mathematics or science. We have done this for so long that it is difficult to realize that our efforts to teach literature have become mainly efforts to institutionalize it and have little to do with the central purpose for which all literature is meant to be written and read--enjoyment. The study of literature has taken on all the trappings of a big business venture: articles, books, dissertations, annotated editions, computerized concordances, bibliographies for bibliographies, and Cliff's Notes. No wonder student readers feel over-whelmed even while not fully comprehending the apparatus which looms over them.

How we go about making the change to focus on reader response and the process of reading is not entirely clear, for no one method can be prescribed for what is, after all, a uniquely personal experience. Although students often are influenced by factors outside the classroom, many of their attitudes toward reading and literature can be traced directly to what occurs in their various English classes. For a beginning, then, let us look at some of the practices identified by students themselves as being detrimental to pleasure in reading and the building of a desire for continued interest in books.

1. Selection of materials.

   Often, book selections are made entirely on the basis of what the teacher thinks the student ought to like without any concern for what the student may need or be interested in at this particular stage in his or her life. Learning theorists have shown us that present success spawns future success; if students can read and comprehend materials easily, they will be encouraged to go on to other reading experiences. Assigning the full text of Hamlet to seventh and eighth graders because "it is good for them to be exposed to one of the greatest playwrights" seems a weak justification for material selection. Careful and patient use of diagnostic surveys and interest inventories, on the other hand, can help the concerned teacher avoid such errors in literature selection.

2. The book report/test syndrome.

   The principal concern behind the handling of most assigned reading in English classes seems to be to insure that the student has read the

material. If we are to assume that a written or oral book report is one done on a book that is read outside of class without benefit of class discussion or analysis--and traditionally it has been--then it should not be difficult to see why students abhor the assignment. Seldom does the student know precisely for what audience he is doing the reading; certainly, in most cases, students are not encouraged to give personal reactions. Instead, a sheet of questions stands between the reader and the book: who is the author; name five characters; write a brief summary of the book. Little wonder students who receive this kind of introduction to literature come to view it with suspicion. If this is what reading is supposed to be all about, they want no part of it. And the student who must stand in front of the class and deliver a book report on a work no one else may have read or is particularly interested in has even greater qualms about literature. Under these conditions, pleasure from reading is not a regular experience.

If students do not have to give a report, they may have to pass a test on what they have read. Again, the test usually does little to foster interest in the art of reading, particularly if the test consists of multiple choice items, true and false statements, recognition of obscure quotations, and matching of minor characters. To provide sufficient discrimination for grading purposes, some teachers even resort to minute detail: "What was the importance of the picture on page 24?" What makes such testing even more damaging, however, is that in the weeks prior to the test, the focus may have been only on the broad concepts of the work and even, perhaps, its relationship to students' lives.

3. Ineffective assignments.

Assignments tossed out as students retreat through the classroom door at the sound of the dismissal bell seldom bring good results. Assignments made in cryptic terms--react to the book in a 500 word essay--are equally unproductive. Any assignment to be made about a work of literature should be an integral part of a lesson or series of lessons, leading naturally from the central activity--reading--and containing sufficient motivating stimulus so students will perceive opportunities for success. Time should be available to set the stage of the assignment--whether it be a pre-reading one, a reading one, or a responding one--and to make certain that students have a clear reason for becoming a part of the reading experience called for by the assignment.

The greatest difficulty in the whole question of reader involvement with literature is one we have created ourselves. We have led students to believe that their experiences are too thin, too immature, and too irrelevant; that they really have nothing to say. Not surprisingly, after being told this in many clever and insidious ways throughout their schooling, they tend to believe it. Consequently, one of the greatest difficulties for the divorced readers--and for

teachers who wish to help them--is to get back in touch with reality, to break down the separation between experience and the real world of the text in order to bring about a happy marriage. We can accomplish this by being certain we avoid pronouncements about what works "really mean" and by providing varied ways for students to respond. If we create an environment in which students feel comfortable about discussing their responses to their reading, we will have gone a long way toward bringing the personal element of literature back onto center stage where it belongs. Let's consider several approaches which may help in creating such an environment.[1]

Reading Groups

Although reading groups have long existed in the elementary grades, such groupings do not often appear in the upper grades and high school. Either all students read the same book and "cover" it in an all-class group or the reading is done individually and responded to through a report or test. Developing small reading interest groups suggests to students that one reason for reading is the opportunity to share reading experiences with others. Teachers who use thematic units have no problem finding clusters of books, stories, poems, and plays from which students can select and then form groups with similar reading interests; the purpose of such groups is not to test comprehension--although that will occur indirectly--but rather to provide a sense of audience, a testing ground for ideas and feelings prompted by the reading. Such groups should not be asked to fill out plot questions or to fill in vocabulary exercises; the focus should be on personal response--questions about why certain characters were popular, others not; why certain actions seemed realistic, others did not; what was difficult to understand; how the reader's experience with the book compares with others who read the same or similar work. These reading groups should

function in much the same way that peer evaluation groups function in writing classes; each reader is there to contribute views, to suggest alternative ways of looking at the reading, to clarify, to question, to provide support to other readers; students even may rotate among groups, finding that perceptions change from group to group. Through such group structures, a believable sense of classroom audience can begin to develop. After some experience in sharing their reading, students will feel more comfortable in a large class situation volunteering their personal experiences derived from the reading.

Oral and Dramatic Activity

Literature in many cases is meant to be heard as well as read. Most forms of literature are easily read aloud and can be used as a basis for oral interpretation and for improvisation. Oral reading provides an aesthetic dimension often missing from students' backgrounds; it also fulfills a practical role by aiding comprehension and appreciation. Time and again, students who have been read to or who had opportunities to read aloud recall the experience with considerable pleasure.

Dramatic activities have gained in favor and now form an important part of much classroom activity. Whether the activity is a pantomime, a dialogue, an improvisation, or a skit, student involvement is direct. Students need not produce polished productions or engage in lengthy rehearsals to know the joy of speaking and acting literature. The British have long understood the importance of the two activities for promoting student response to literature; Americans are just beginning to discover what such activities can do for students.

A quick inventory of many of the works taught in schools will reveal the dramatic possibilities; for instance, here is an example for a short story:

You are visiting a friend for a month. Your friend is very popular with the opposite sex, but you don't seem to have much luck. You overhear your friend telling a group of people that you are attractive but dull. Confront the friend with this statement and demand an explanation.
based on "Bernice Bobs Her Hair" by F. Scott Fitzgerald.

And here is one for poetry:

Two people are sitting in front of a button which, when pushed, would destroy every machine in the world. They argue about whether or not they should push it.

Players: 1. a nature-lover who thinks that man has made such a mess of civilization that it ought to be destroyed and that it would be better for man to return to his natural, primitive state.
2. a scientist who believes that technology and progress create a better world for mankind.
based on "The World is Too Much With Us" by William Wordsworth.

Writing Activity

Writing has always been a part of literature study and three basic types of writing appear most often in this context: 1) writing that uses literature as a springboard into imaginative writing, where the emphasis is upon non-critical response; 2) interpretive and critical writing, most frequently embodied in the analysis of a work; and 3) imitative writing, where the activity focuses on experimentation with another's style, tone, point of view, or subject.

Of these three types the critical analysis is the most frequently used. Students explore in more detail points raised in class discussion, read in other sources, or arrived at through reflection. But perhaps the most valuable writing activity calls for the student's response to what has been read without dwelling unduly upon critical reaction. Students should see that writing is an extension of their feelings about a work, and they should be encouraged to explore those feelings in print. At first such an activity may seem foreign to students, accustomed as they are to writing critically "distanced" papers. For students of all ability levels, though, the opportunity to explore how and why they respond is just as important as being able to express in written form whether a work belongs in

the Romantic Movement or the Age of Enlightenment. Consider the following example:

> I imagine the story "The Waltz" by Dorothy Parker presents a view which many girls find quite amusing. As a guy, though, it has only substantiated for me what I have always thought my dancing partner has been thinking every time I have attempted to dance slow.
>
> Probably forever, after reading this story, I am going to wonder if the "Yes, I'd love to" responses I get to my invitations are really genuine. Even the girls I've danced with that seemed to have a good time may only have been acting a part that women seem to handle with ease. For example, the girl I took to my junior prom and who said she had a good time may have been in a living hell the whole night.
>
> One area, though, that I always had thought I handled adequately was the small talk involved during a dance. The problem now is that some of the responses made in this story sound very similar to some of the responses made by my dancing partners when I said something witty.
>
> Dorothy Parker doesn't offer me any help in this dilemma. If she could have offered some hint as to how to know when your partner is suffering, I would feel more comfortable. At least then a person could leave before psychologically scarring the other person for life. Perhaps the reason she has offered no hints is that a woman cannot even understand the ways of other women. If this is so, then perhaps all women are individuals and some day I may even find one that doesn't mind or even notice if I wear a terrible-looking outfit, step on a toe, kick her in the shin, or make a stupid remark. Let's hope so.

Media Activity

Accustomed as they may be to relying almost exclusively on the printed words, teachers may overlook a primary resource in non-written materials and the mass media. Photographs, paintings, music, filmstrips, records, tapes, and films make the study of literature more interesting by adding a dimension that is so much a part of students' lives. Too often this aspect of the outside world is not acknowledged within the four walls of the classroom. But for some students, the visual may be more accessible than print. To understand the significance of imagery, for instance, a student working with paintings, advertisements, and photographs may grasp the concept much quicker than by laboring over a tightly woven imagistic pattern in a poem. The same may be true of symbolism and other more abstract literary devices. Introducing such concepts or devices through

various media and then transferring the learning to print often makes the learning more effective than if the procedures were reversed.

Music finds a home in chorus or band, but it has its place in the study of literature as well. Rock and pop lyrics can serve as a starting point for discussing poetry: various types of music help to establish the significance of tone or mood. Students can select and defend choices of music to illustrate ideas and themes in literature. Content of popular music may become a part of a thematic unit. The comparison of "Chim-chiminee" from the musical Mary Poppins to William Blake's poem "The Chimney Sweep" offers an excellent opportunity for students to discover varying points of view on the same subject; the music sentimentalizes the life of the chimney sweep, while Blake's poem stresses the harsh reality of such a life.

Television and film offer additional opportunities. Students watch an inordinate amount of television. Rather than railing against the apparent influence of television, teachers would help students more by drawing upon their television knowledge to make comparisons and contrasts in literature. Certain character types, situations, and themes found on television also appear in literature and discussions of the way each medium treats these aspects can be exciting and beneficial. Film, too, offers excellent opportunities for supplementing literature. Whether the activity is to compare the treatment of a novel or play in film with the print version, or whether it is to develop critical skills in "reading" a film, student involvement will be strong. Many films relate well to thematic focus, and sufficient collections of films now exist at reasonable cost so the teacher can seriously expect to obtain some for classroom use. Although some English teachers may believe that using film and television in the classroom is not "teaching English," many more are discover-

ing just how exciting such study can be and how well students make the transition from film and video to print.

Our nation has an alarmingly high percentage of students who seldom read once they leave formal schooling, mainly because they have been taught that literature is a depersonalized object that has little relevance to their lives outside the classroom. If we are to reverse this trend, we must acknowledge openly the great importance of the union between the reader's personal response and the text. Only in this way will the "reading process" and the "literary experience" become synonymous; when that connection is made in the minds of students, then, perhaps, we will be on our way to creating a nation of literate people who truly understand the joy of reading.

Notes

[1]For a more in-depth discussion of these and other activities, see Charles R. Duke, Teaching Literature Today, Portland, Maine: J. Weston Walch Publishers, 1979.